

Calls for CITES to address the corruption fueling the illegal wildlife trade

23 September 2016 / Mike Gaworecki

CITES' seventeenth major Conference of the Parties (CoP17) begins in Johannesburg, South Africa tomorrow, and it represents a key opportunity to address the corruption fueling the illegal wildlife trade, experts say.



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- The European Union and Senegal have put forward a resolution at CoP17 proposing measures to tackle corruption in wildlife trafficking.
- Late last year, Yury Fedotov, executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, joined with John Scanlon, secretary-general of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), to call for increased anti-corruption efforts in the fight against the illegal wildlife trade.
- A new report by independent conservationist and researcher Karl Ammann, who has been studying the issue for decades, paints a sobering portrait of the extent of the corruption enabling the illegal wildlife trade.

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In a joint statement, Fedotov and Scanlon said that "corruption feeds and sustains wildlife and forest crime, as well as many other crimes including terrorism and extremism."

The two did not mince words when it came to diagnosing the problem and prescribing a solution: "For the criminals to succeed, customs officials must be bribed to look away; logging and hunting licenses forged; and poachers set free due to obstructed prosecutions. Thanks to corruption's deadly touch, the natural wealth of countries is being stolen, efforts to eradicate poverty paralysed and development efforts greatly hindered. We are united in the belief that, by addressing corruption and bribery, we can deal a significant blow to all those

involved in this transnational organized crime."

CITES' seventeenth major Conference of the Parties (CoP17) begins in Johannesburg, South Africa tomorrow, and it represents a key opportunity to address the corruption fueling the illegal wildlife trade, experts say. In an attempt to seize this opportunity, the European Union and Senegal have put forward a resolution proposing measures to tackle corruption in wildlife trafficking.

"[I]t is an important development that for the first time, the issue of corruption will be formally debated at the world's most important wildlife trade meeting," Rob Parry-Jones, head of international policy for the WWF / TRAFFIC Wildlife Crime Initiative, and Aled Williams, a senior advisor at the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, wrote in an op-ed for Business Daily.

China and Guinea: A case study in the illegal wildlife trade

A new report by independent conservationist and researcher Karl Ammann, who has been studying the issue for decades, paints a sobering portrait of the extent of the corruption enabling the illegal wildlife trade – the report is essentially a case study of the illicit trade of primates between Guinea and China and the opportunities to tackle the problem that have been missed by the CITES Secretariat in the past.

"Between 2007 and 2011 a great deal of illegal ape trade took place between Guinea and China when at least 104 endangered chimpanzees and 10 endangered gorillas were officially reported as having been exported from Guinea to

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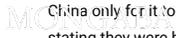
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China only for it to later come to light that these were wild animals exported illegally by way of fraudulent CITES permits stating they were bred in captivity," according to the report.

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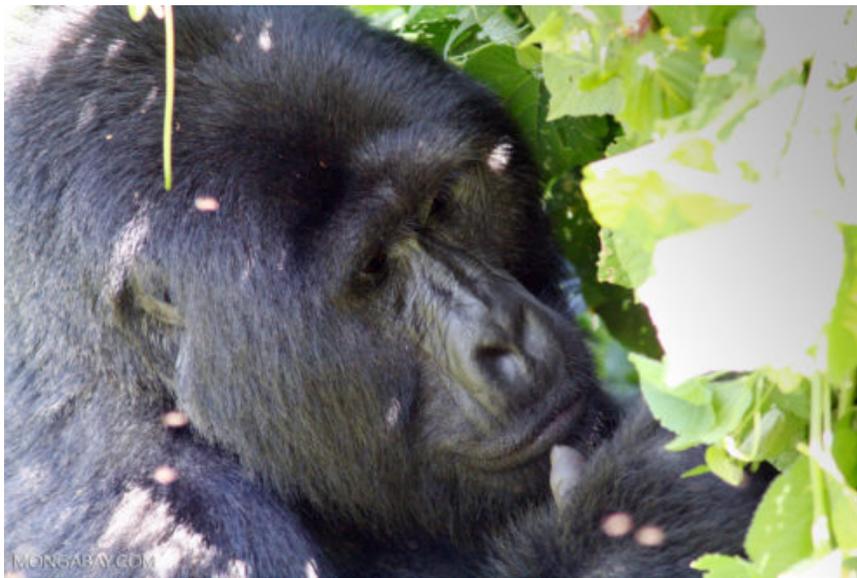
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The CITES Secretariat went on record confirming that "exports have occurred from Guinea in relation to specimens declared as having been bred in captivity... in violation of the Convention" in 2011, Ammann notes. But even though Article VIII of CITES states that "Parties shall take appropriate measures to enforce the provisions of the present Convention and to prohibit trade in specimens in violation thereof," China has not taken any of the recommended actions to address the problem.

"The CITES Secretariat, apparently content with this failure by China to do what is required under the convention has, similarly, taken no action whatsoever to compel China to do what the convention requires," Ammann writes in the report. The recommended actions include penalizing trade in or possession of illegal wildlife as well as the confiscation of the animal and its return to the state of export.

As a decentralized system, CITES leaves enforcement to member countries and has no enforcement body with the power to seize assets or arrest criminals involved in illegal trade. Each country that is a party to CITES has a management authority that issues export permits for animals that are legally exportable, but, as Ammann has demonstrated, corrupt authorities in African countries that are home to wild apes are facilitating the export of these animals with improper and even fraudulent permits. This has created a situation in which apes are being traded more or less in the open on social media.

One of the only enforcement actions that did take place after the revelations of the fraudulent CITES permits used to export apes from Guinea to China came in September 2015 when the former wildlife director and head of the CITES Management Authority of Guinea was arrested for his role in the corrupt and fraudulent issuance of CITES export permits. "Concerns regarding illegal trade in CITES-listed species involving Guinea have been dealt with in a thorough manner by the [CITES] Standing Committee and the Secretariat," a briefing for CoP17 by the CITES Secretariat states, per the report.



Critically endangered Eastern Mountain gorilla (Gorilla beringei beringei) in the Bwindi jungle. Photo by Rhett Butler.

But the ensuing court case was actually initiated by an NGO and never joined by the government, Ammann reports. None of the fake and falsified permits were ever presented in court, which could be another symptom of the corruption allowing the illegal trade to flourish, he suggests: "In some parts of Africa the bribe income officials are collecting through selling fake or falsified permits is now such that they encourage the illegal trade (standard quote for a fake ape permit is \$5,000)," Ammann told Mongabay.

The only other action taken was in March 2013, when the 63rd meeting of the CITES Standing Committee recommended the suspension of any commercial trade in CITES-listed species from Guinea.

Import and export permits are the "backbone of the CITES convention," Ammann said, and if countries are able to be non-compliant with CITES provisions and there are no actions taken by the CITES Secretariat to compel their compliance, "there is a danger that the convention is becoming part of the problem."

It works like this, Ammann explained: "Dealers buy falsified permits from the [CITES management authority] representatives of their country. In some cases blank and signed and stamped documents. They are then used for the export and import."

In the case of the imported apes from Guinea, Ammann found that Chinese officials had issued the necessary import permits that declared the apes as captive-born before Guinea had even issued the corresponding export permit declaring

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them captive-born. "So the scam started in China," Ammann concluded. "We have the evidence of one such case for 7 chimps."

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Yet there was no action at the importing end, as the report documents, and "suspending Guinea for the commercial trade — while all these transactions were declared as non-commercial mostly with the purpose code Z for Zoo which makes it scientific and educational, never mind how much money changed hands — was once again avoiding dealing with the issue," Ammann said.

The CITES Secretariat does have punitive powers that Secretary-General John Scanlon could use to rein in countries like China that are flouting the law, but according to Amman, they are not being put to use often enough:

"The CITES Secretariat has the unique enforcement tool of recommending trade suspension of any party in constant non-compliance of convention rules and regulations. The Guinea-China case involved some 150 chimps and 10 gorillas and was the largest such scenario ever with no attempt of any kind to enforce Article VIII of the Convention. If no action is possible on such a pronounced non-compliance issue then is there a point in spending more money on CITES? To what extend does the lack of enforcement now encourage the trade?"

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